

EXAMINED LIVES

SOCRATES



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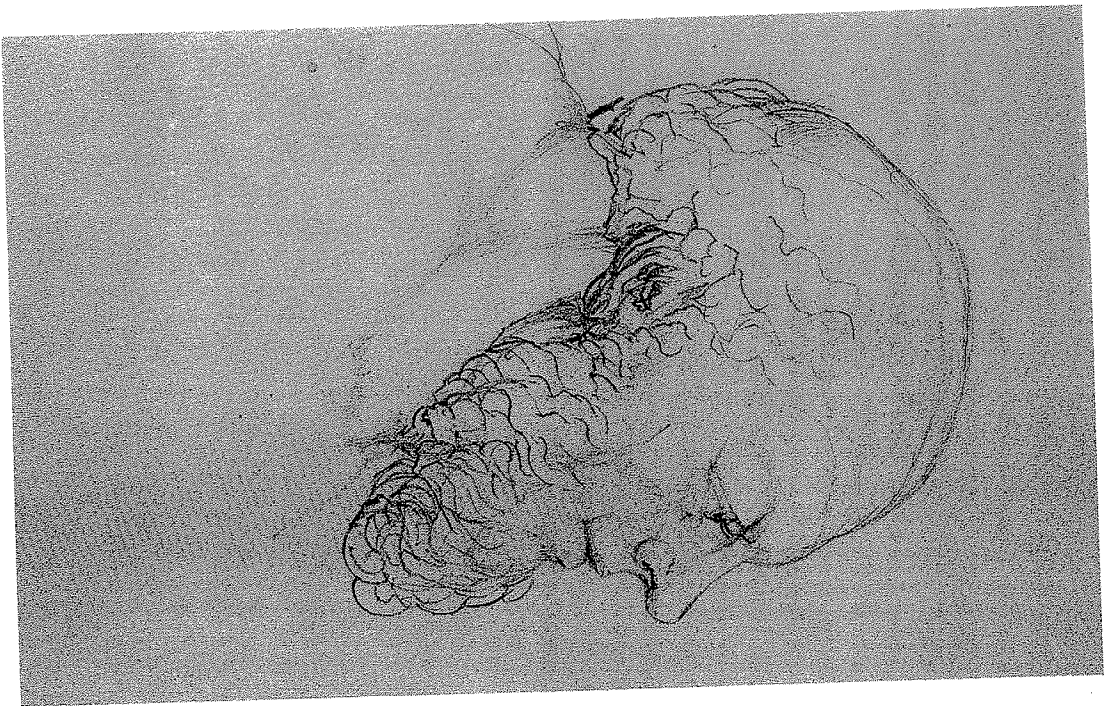


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FARRAR, STRAUS AND GIROUX NEW YORK

2011

pe. 18-41



Socrates in profile, a graphite drawing, c. 1820, by the British poet, print-maker, and mystagogue William Blake (1757–1827). “I was Socrates,” Blake remarked near the end of his life. “I must have had conversations with him. So I had with Jesus Christ. I have an obscure recollection of having been with both of them.” (Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, USA/The Bridgeman Art Library International)

In the middle of the fifth century B.C., the city-state of Athens was at the zenith of its power and influence. After leading an alliance of Greek city-states to victory over the Persian Empire in battles at Marathon (490 B.C.), Salamis (480), and Plataea (479), the city consolidated a democratic regime. It peacefully extended political power to all citizens—native-born male residents—and created a model of the enlightened rule of law. At the same time, it established a far-flung hegemony over a variety of maritime colonies and vassal Greek city-states. Prospering from the trade and tribute provided by its empire, the city amassed the eastern Mediterranean’s most feared military machine, a lavishly equipped navy, backed up by cavalry and infantry. The *de facto* leader of the Greek-speaking world, Athens led the Hellenes in education as well, attracting teachers from throughout the region.

Its people “believed themselves to be a priestly nation to whom, at a time of universal famine, Apollo had entrusted the mission of taking vows on behalf of all the Greeks and barbarians,” wrote Jacob Burckhardt, the great Swiss historian. “Attica was traditionally credited with the inventions of civilization to an extent positively insulting to all other nations and the rest of the Greeks. According to this tradition, it was the Athenians who first taught the human race how to sow crops

and use spring water; not only were they first to grow olives and figs, but they invented law and justice."

And they in fact invented "philosophy." Socrates, the first man to be renowned as a philosopher, was born in Athens around 469 B.C. Although he grew up in a golden age in a great city, the ancient sources agree that there was nothing glittering about his pedigree or upbringing. He was the son of Sophroniscus, a stonemason, and of Phaenarete, a midwife. A citizen of Athens by birth, he belonged to the district of Alopecce. The externals of his life were nondescript—his family, they say, was neither rich nor poor.

But his inner experience was extraordinary. Socrates heard a voice inaudible to anyone else. In some situations, the voice ordered him to halt what he was doing and to change his course of conduct. According to Plato, our primary source for almost everything we think we know about the first philosopher, Socrates considered the voice to be uniquely his own, as if it were directed to him alone from a supernatural sort of tutelary spirit. A source of wonder and disquiet, the voice set Socrates apart. From the time he was a child, he felt isolated and different—an individual in a collective that prized its sense of community, vividly expressed in its web of customary rituals and traditional religious beliefs, and crowned by a set of political institutions that embodied the novel ideal of democracy, a new form of collective self-rule.

Every Athenian citizen was expected to fight for the fatherland. The waging of war was an almost constant concern in these years, as Athens struggled to maintain its regional supremacy over its only real rival in the Greek world, the fortified land power of Sparta. Though never rich, Socrates had sufficient wealth to outfit himself with armor and serve as a foot soldier, or hoplite, in the city's citizen army. In 432, Socrates participated in the siege of Potidaea, where he demonstrated an almost superhuman stamina—one of the few salient traits recorded in virtually every ancient story told about him.

In these years, Athens was politically divided. On the one side stood proponents of extending political rights and obligations to every citizen, no matter how poor. This party of avowed democrats was headed by Pericles (c. 495–429), the city's elected commander in chief, who was the unchallenged leader of Athens in the 440s and 430s, and an orator who used his formidable gifts to frame a rationale for the self-government

of the city by its ordinary citizens. In response, some wealthier Athenians fought, as the rich often do, to exercise unconstrained power; they denigrated the intelligence of the Athenian common man, and in some cases they commended the authoritarian institutions characteristic of other Greek city-states, such as Sparta.

Where Socrates stood in these epochal debates over democracy is not known—an odd fact, given that Athens expected its citizens to participate actively in the political life of the polis. As a young man, some say, he frequented the circles around Pericles, who was no friend of tyranny. There is sketchy evidence that his wife, Xanthippe, whom he married around 420, may have been an aristocrat. There are also stories, all of them unreliable, about a younger half brother who may have been one of the archons, or rulers, of Athens in the period after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants in 403 B.C.

According to Diogenes Laertius, "he was so orderly in his way of life that on several occasions when pestilence broke out in Athens [in 430, at the start of the Peloponnesian War] he was the only man to escape infection"—an exaggeration, obviously, though a vast number of citizens did perish, and it was the plague that cost Pericles his life. In any case, Socrates prided himself on living plainly and "used to say that he most enjoyed the food which was least in need of condiment, and the drink which made him feel the least hankering for some other drink; and that he was nearest to the gods when he had the fewest wants."

Sometime after assuming the duties of adult citizenship, Socrates began to behave strangely. Ignoring custom, he refused to follow in his father's footsteps as a stonemason. Instead of learning how to earn a living by carving rock, Socrates became preoccupied with learning how to live the best life conceivable. He expressed astonishment that "the sculptors of marble statues should take pains to make the block of marble into a perfect likeness of man, and should take no pains about themselves lest they turn out mere blocks, not men."

The ancient authorities do not agree on precisely why or when Socrates took up his strange new calling. The association of the word *philosophy* with Socrates and his way of life was largely the work of one man, Plato, who was the most famous of his followers. A conjunction of the Greek word *philo* ("lover") and *sophos* ("wisdom"), *philosophos*, or philosopher, as Plato defined the term, described a man who yearned

for wisdom, a seeker of truth—a man like Socrates, whom Plato sharply distinguished from other sages, or Sophists. (According to Plato, who was not impartial, Sophists were neither truly wise nor were they sincere seekers of truth—they were charlatans, skilled mainly in devious forms of debate. Before Plato, by contrast, Sophists were widely admired as experts and wise men—the legendary Attic lawgiver Solon was a Sophist, in this original honorific sense, and so was Thales of Miletus, another one of the so-called Seven Sages.)

When Socrates was coming of age, Athens was teeming with teachers from throughout the Greek-speaking world. The city's most influential democratic leader, Pericles, championed the new learning and is said to have consorted with some of the era's most prominent professors of wisdom, including Anaxagoras. A theorist of nature, Anaxagoras discoursed for a fee, specializing in presenting theories about the organizing principles of the cosmos. He shocked some Athenians by his bold claim that the sun was a large, incandescent stone. Other teachers, like the orator Gorgias (c. 485–380 B.C.), made money by showing students how to shape the opinion of the citizenry through artful speech when the *demos* met each month in the open-air assembly that was the hallmark of the Athenian democracy.

According to Plato, it was Socrates' dissatisfaction with teachers like Anaxagoras and Gorgias that led him to go his own way and to raise questions independently about the best way to live. But Aristotle claimed that Socrates was primarily inspired by the motto inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi, "Know thyself."

Perhaps the most famous of the maxims associated with the temple at Delphi ("Nothing too much" is another), the injunction to "Know thyself" first appears in Greek literature in the fifth century, most notably in Aeschylus's play *Prometheus Bound*. In defiance of the wishes of Zeus, Prometheus has stolen fire from the gods and given it to mankind; though he is punished for this presumptuous act, Prometheus remains stubbornly defiant, which provokes the god of the sea, Oceanus, to admonish him to "know yourself, and make compliant your youthful ways"—by obeying the will of Zeus. In other words, know your limits.

Whatever motivated Socrates—and however he may have interpreted the Delphic maxim to "Know thyself"—he evidently began to elaborate in practice a new mode of inquiry. It was remarkable for its

public, and implicitly egalitarian, style. Spurning the more formal settings preferred by other professors of wisdom, who generally held court in households wealthy enough to host a lecture, Socrates strolled through the city. He visited the marketplace when it was crowded with shoppers, talking with anyone who was interested, young or old, rich or poor. When bystanders gathered, they were invited to join in the ongoing argument he was holding, with himself and with others, over the best conceivable way to live.

At some point after Socrates had embarked on this eccentric new career, Chaerephon, a friend since youth and a loyal supporter of the democracy, journeyed to the Temple of Apollo, where cities as well as individuals throughout this period frequently went to receive divine guidance on rules of purity and questions of religious observance, and sometimes about law. At Delphi, according to Plato, Chaerephon consulted (as one normally did) the Pythia, the priestess through whom the god Apollo spoke.

There were two ways to consult the Delphic oracle. A written response required the sacrifice of an animal. But a simple yes or no cost nothing. Whether the answer was yes or no was determined by lot: it depended on whether the Pythia randomly plucked from an urn a bean that was white or one that was black. Since Chaerephon was probably too poor to offer an animal for sacrifice, it is likely that he popped a simple question, and that the Pythia plucked a bean to produce a response.

Was anyone wiser than Socrates?

No.

According to Plato in his *Apology*, Socrates reacted to news of this oracle as any pious Greek would. The god never lied. But Socrates did not regard himself as wise. So what could the oracle mean?

From this point forward, the life of Socrates became a consecrated quest—an epic inquiry, meant to unriddle a message from a god. His search for wisdom became an obsession. According to Plato, he ceased "to engage in public affairs to any extent"—a noteworthy decision, given the prevailing belief, most memorably expressed by Pericles, that abstention from public affairs rendered a citizen "useless."

The longer that Socrates struggled to know himself, the more puzzled he became. What, for example, was the meaning of his inner voice?

Was there any rhyme or reason behind the audible interdictions he experienced as irresistible? Did Socrates in fact embody a good way of life? And, if so, how could he possibly have acquired the ability to be so good?

Whether or not his way of life was useful to the city—and on this point his friends and enemies disagreed—Socrates was storied for the abstracted states that overtook him. “He sometimes stops and stands wherever he happens to be,” reports a friend in Plato’s *Symposium*. Later in the same dialogue, Plato depicts another friend recalling an even more striking episode that occurred when both men served together on the campaign to Potidaea:

One time at dawn he began to think something over and stood in the same spot considering it, and when he found no solution, he didn’t leave but stood there inquiring. It got to be midday, and people became aware of it, wondering at it among themselves, saying Socrates had stood there since dawn thinking about something. Finally some of the Ionians, when evening came, after they’d eaten—it was then summer—carried their bedding out to sleep in the cool air and to watch to see if he’d also stand there all night. He stood until dawn came and the sun rose; then he offered a prayer to the sun, and left.

Famously aloof, Socrates could also be, in Plato’s metaphor, a “gadfly”—a chronic source of irritation. Serenely self-assured, perhaps because he was blessed by a divine sense of mission, he was also ostentatiously self-doubting, professing repeatedly his own lack of wisdom. To critics, his avowed humility seemed obnoxious, even disingenuous. Was not Socrates like those Athenian aristocrats who struck a Spartan pose of austere self-restraint, in order to show their superiority to the ordinary run of vulgar men?

This was perhaps the most disturbing aspect of Socrates’ character. The more strenuously he tried to prove the god right, by exposing the ignorance of supposed experts while protesting his own lack of knowledge, the more admirable he seemed to followers like Chaerephon, who worshipped him as if he were the wisest man alive.

Abjuring the material trappings of his class, he became notorious for his disdain of worldly goods. “Often when he looked at the multi-

tude of wares exposed for sale, he would say to himself, ‘How many things I can do without!’” He took care to exercise regularly, but his appearance was shabby. He expressed no interest in seeing the world at large, leaving the city only to fulfill his military obligations. He learned what he could by questioning the beliefs held by other residents of Athens, scrutinizing their beliefs rather than pondering the heavens or poring over books: “They relate that Euripides gave him the treatise of Heraclitus and asked his opinion upon it, and that his reply was ‘The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it.’”

Still hoping to learn how to live the best life conceivable, Socrates, according to Plato, began to query anyone with a reputation in any field for knowledge. Craftsmen knew a thing or two about their crafts and were even able to train their children to follow in their footsteps. But most craftsmen had nothing coherent to say about justice, piety, or courage—the kinds of virtues that Socrates, like most Athenians, supposed were crucial to living a good life. As Socrates kept searching, a conviction took shape: craftsmen had no more wisdom than Socrates himself, and neither did poets, politicians, orators, or the other famous teachers he queried.

In fact, all these people seemed even *more* ignorant than Socrates. Unlike him, most of them were complacent, not disquieted; vainglorious, not humble; and arrogantly unaware, unless irritated by the gadfly, of just how limited their knowledge really was.

A primary obstacle to true wisdom was false confidence. And so Socrates now set out to destroy such confidence, not by writing books (he evidently wrote nothing) and not by establishing a formal school (for he did no such thing), but rather through his unrelenting interrogation of himself and others, no matter their rank or status.

Such behavior did not make Socrates popular. “Frequently owing to his vehemence in argument, men set upon him with their fists and tore his hair out; . . . for the most part he was despised and laughed at, yet bore all this abuse patiently.”

At the same time, his fearless habit of cross-examining powerful men in public won him a growing circle of followers—and helped turn him into one of the most recognizable figures in the Athens of his day. In busts erected shortly after his death—Socrates was the first Greek

sage to be so honored—he appears as a balding older man with a big belly, bug eyes, and thick, protuberant lips. According to Plato, his friends compared him with Silenus—an ugly and aging satyr traditionally associated with uncanny wisdom. Centuries later, retelling the lore surrounding the physical ugliness of the philosopher, Nietzsche gleefully recounted how the physiognomist Zopyrus was said to have sized him up: “A foreigner who knew about faces once passed through Athens and told Socrates to his face that he was a *monstrum* . . . And Socrates merely answered, ‘You know me, sir!’”

Anecdotes like this began to circulate about Socrates, and Diogenes Laertius recounts a number of emblematic episodes, for example: One day a young man came to Socrates with an apology, saying, “I am a poor man and have nothing else to give, but offer you myself, and he answered, ‘Nay, do you not see that you are offering me the greatest gift of all?’” Socrates was walking on a narrow street in central Athens when he first met Xenophon, who would become, along with Plato, his most influential follower. Barring the way with his walking stick, Socrates asked the young man “where every kind of food was sold. Upon receiving a reply, he put another question, ‘And where do men become good and honorable?’ Xenophon was dumbfounded. ‘Then follow me,’ said Socrates, ‘and learn.’”

There is an even more revealing story in an essay by Plutarch (c. A.D. 46–119):

Aristippus, when he met Ischomachus at Olympia, asked him by what manner of conversation Socrates succeeded in so affecting the young men. And when Aristippus had gleaned a few odd seeds and samples of Socrates’ talk, he was so moved that he suffered a physical collapse and became quite pale and thin. Finally he sailed for Athens and slaked his burning thirst with draughts from the fountain-head, and engaged in a study of the man and his words and his philosophy, of which the end and aim was to come to recognize one’s vices and so rid oneself of them.

By 423, Socrates was sufficiently renowned to be caricatured by one of the most celebrated playwrights in Athens, Aristophanes, in his comedy *The Clouds*. With poetic license, the playwright condensed the

features of a variety of contemporary professors of wisdom into the character he called Socrates.

Though Socrates in fact organized no school, Aristophanes portrayed him as the guru in charge of a cloistered think tank. In the play, a dishonest farmer named Strepsiades sends his son Phidippides to learn from “the high priest of subtlest poppycock,” hoping that he will acquire enough rhetorical tricks to help the father evade his creditors. When the son emerges from the care of Socrates and turns his gift for gab against his father, Strepsiades burns down the school.

Onstage, Socrates first appears in a basket, gazing skyward, and treating his earthbound interlocutors as an Olympian god might treat a manifestly lower form of life—with sovereign disdain. He is a purveyor of holy secrets, hair-splitting arguments, and a peculiar sort of contemplative introspection that does not, on the face of it, promise practical results. Modesty is not one of his salient traits, and he compares himself strangely: “You strut around like a grand gander, roll your eyes, go barefoot, endure all, and hold such high opinions.” He peppers his pupils with pointed questions, meant to probe and test their personal character. When his school goes up in smoke, it seems like rough justice for a prattler and a parasite.

In 423, when *The Clouds* was first produced, Athens and its allies were entering the eighth year of the Peloponnesian War (431–404) with Sparta and its allies. That year, Socrates apparently saw action again as a foot soldier, this time in an expedition to Delium, where the Athenian army suffered a signal defeat. Socrates is said to have acted with exemplary courage in the retreat, helping to keep the enemy’s cavalry at bay.

The defeat at Delium, coming on the heels of the plague that had devastated the city in the first years of the war, broke Athenian morale. Doubts about the city’s military strategy and tactics boiled over in the assemblies of the people (which were regularly scheduled public meetings led by elected generals and dominated by popular orators of variable talent and uncertain integrity).

Though Plato says that Socrates disclaimed any ability to teach, just as he evidently refused to accept fees from prospective students, wealthy young men flocked to his side. They offered him friendship and patronage, hoping that he, like other prominent teachers, might help them

win public influence and exercise political power. With their support, he was free to pursue his calling without material concerns.

A cross section of the Athenian elite, his best-known companions fell into different political camps. Among his disciples were Nicias and Laches, generals loyal to the democracy, but also Charmides and Critias, pro-Spartan oligarchs. But the most famous disciple of all was Alcibiades—a man too cunning to be categorized politically.

The ancient authorities stress Alcibiades' sheer beauty as a young man. He was descended from a family sufficiently rich to equip a trireme, a warship powered by a team of rowers and the mainstay of the city's imperial fleet. After the death of his father, it is said that Pericles himself became one of his guardians. "Soon a large number of high-born men began to gather around him and follow him around." A career in politics beckoned: he was, after all, the kind of aristocrat tailor-made for the role of a democratic leader (or demagogue)—dashing and handsome, clever, and quick on his feet.

Socrates knew Alcibiades from at least the time of their campaign together at Potidaea, when Alcibiades would have been eighteen years old and Socrates about forty. By the standards of the day, this made the boy a normal object of the older man's erotic interest. (There is no Greek or Latin word that corresponds to the modern term *homosexual-ity*, and erotic relations were judged according to the age, social status, gender, and active or passive role of the participants.) According to Plutarch (who credits the account of Plato), "The fact that Socrates was in love with him strongly suggests that the boy was endowed with a natural aptitude for virtue."

The philosopher now faced a daunting, and perhaps impossible, challenge: to convert his most prominent potential disciple from his lust for power to a love of wisdom.

His ally in this venture proved to be Alcibiades' desire for Socrates. To the astonishment of others, the beautiful boy couldn't get enough of the ugly old man. Yet when Socrates did sleep with him, Alcibiades was disappointed by his master's superhuman self-restraint: "When I arose after having slept with Socrates, it was nothing more than if I'd slept with my father or an elder brother."

This passage from the *Symposium* remains the classic image of Platonic love, a form of unsatisfied carnal desire that Socrates characteristically

tried to harness and redirect toward spiritual objects, according to Plato and several other contemporary sources. How Socrates set about trying to effect this transformation is the subject of the *Alcibiades*, a Socratic dialogue by an unknown ancient author that was included in the Platonic corpus and was widely read as an introduction to Platonic thought until the nineteenth century.

Like most of the other extant Socratic dialogues by Plato, the *Alcibiades* consists mainly of a series of short questions and answers that begins when Socrates raises a doubt—in this case, about the ability of the younger man to realize his naked ambition: "You want your reputation and your influence to saturate all mankind."

Socrates in the dialogue proceeds to question Alcibiades about the specific know-how that might enable him to realize his stated goal. Is he really sure that he is "better" than other men? How does he understand his superiority? Does he behave more justly than others? Is he wiser?

As their conversation proceeds, the cocky young man becomes more and more confused: "I must be in some absolutely bizarre condition! When you ask me questions, first I think one thing, and then I think something else."

If Alcibiades is this confused, how can he presume to have his influence "saturate all mankind"? "Don't you realize that the errors in our conduct are caused by this kind of ignorance, of thinking that we know when we don't know?" When Alcibiades resists the implications of this line of reasoning, Socrates asks him to "trust in me, and in the Delphic inscription 'know thyself.'"

Still suspicious, Alcibiades asks Socrates what, precisely, he must know about himself. "The command that we should know ourselves means that we should know our souls."

What follows is so abstract and woodenly didactic that most modern scholars doubt that Plato himself could have written it (never mind whether Socrates could have ever really said any such thing). The crux of the philosopher's quest, according to this text, is to attain true knowledge of *psyche*, a Greek word usually translated into English as "soul" (and also a Greek root of the English word *psychology*). In Homer, *psyche* is what leaves the body on death—perhaps it is breath, perhaps life itself. In the *Alcibiades*, Socrates goes farther, asserting that *psyche*

is immaterial and immortal—and that the soul of a man is like a god within. What Alcibiades needs to prosper is what Socrates already exemplifies: because he has come to know his true soul, he is now able to lead a life of perfect justice, moderation, and reasoned inquiry.

Toward the close of the *Alcibiades*, Socrates vows to his prize pupil that “I will never forsake you now, never”—but then adds, ominously, “unless the Athenian people make you corrupt and ugly.” And the last lines of the dialogue foreshadow the real fates of Alcibiades and of his teacher: “I should like to believe that you will persevere, but I’m afraid—not because I distrust your nature, but because I know how powerful the city is—I’m afraid it might get the better of both me and you.”

As Plutarch tells the rest of the story, Socrates at first shamed Alcibiades into compliance. “‘He crouched down in fear, like a defeated cock, with wing aslant,’ and he believed that Socrates’ mission really was a way of carrying out the gods’ wishes by looking after young men and keeping them free from corruption. He began to despise himself and admire Socrates; he began to value Socrates’ kindness and feel humble because of his goodness.” Infatuated with philosophy, he became “cruel and intractable to the rest of his lovers,” including Anytus, the son of Anthemion (who many years later would charge Socrates with impiety and corrupting the youth).

The battle for Alcibiades’ soul now began in earnest.

In Plutarch’s account in his *Lives of the Noble Greeks and Romans*, Socrates bravely persevered “against all the odds and despite the number and importance of his rivals.” But as time passed, Alcibiades wavered in his devotion to philosophy. Sometimes, he would give Socrates the slip, acting “like a runaway slave,” in order to stake his thirst for pleasure. Yet “time and again,” according to Plutarch, “Socrates took him back in a state of complete promiscuity and presumptuousness, and by force of argument would pull him together and teach him humility and restraint, by showing him how great his flaws were and how far he was from virtue.”

But Socrates was finally no match for the prospect of glory held out to Alcibiades by his political consultants: “it was by pandering to his ambitious longing for recognition that his corrupters set him prematurely on the road to high endeavor.” And in Plutarch’s cautionary

version of the story, Alcibiades, by breaking free of Socrates and his influence, becomes the perfect antiphilosopher—a paragon of unprincipled viciousness: cruel, deceitful, prepared to say whatever he thinks his audience wants to hear and to feign whatever character he reckons will win popular approval. “He could change more abruptly than a chameleon.”

With a student like this, it is no wonder that Plato sometimes depicts Socrates expressing skepticism about his ability to teach anybody anything. And although the accounts in both Plato and Plutarch put the blame for the vices of Alcibiades squarely on the institutions of the Athenian democracy and on the young man’s unruly will to power, one has to wonder about the judgment of Socrates, who first courted, and then failed to convert, an apparently promising pupil to the quest for true wisdom.

In the years that followed, Alcibiades entered politics with a vengeance. Exploiting his extensive network of highly placed friends, and also his talent for flattery, he rose rapidly to become one of the city’s most powerful leaders. Meanwhile, the war with Sparta dragged on inconclusively. (It was in these same years that Aristophanes poked fun at Socrates on stage.) Elected commander of the Athenian forces in 419 (the same position from which Pericles had effectively governed Athens), Alcibiades skillfully sowed chaos throughout the Peloponnese. He was a shrewd military strategist, and his physical courage further enhanced his reputation and influence.

He was eyed warily by “the notable men of Athens,” who (writes Plutarch) “combined feelings of abhorrence and disgust with fear of his haughty and lawless attitude, which struck them as tyrannical in its excessiveness.” But the common people were impressed by “the donations he made, the choruses he financed, the superlative extravaganzas he put on for the city, the fame of his ancestors, his eloquence, his physical good looks and fitness, and his experience and prowess in war.”

In 415, knowing that the Athenians had long coveted control of Sicily, Alcibiades overcame the qualms of his rivals and persuaded the Athenian assembly to send out a large fleet to conquer the island. What happened next, as witnessed by Thucydides and recounted by Plutarch, remains unrivaled in the annals of ruthless realpolitik.

After he set sail with the Athenian fleet for Sicily, Alcibiades was summoned back to Athens in order to stand trial for impiety—opponents alleged that he and his supporters had mutilated the city's herms, sacred statues of Hermes, which were supposed to protect Athens and its residents. Defying the city's summons, Alcibiades instead defected to Sparta, where he betrayed the Athenian strategy in Sicily. Understandably unable to convince his Spartan hosts of his trustworthiness, and learning that they were planning to condemn him to death, he fled to Persia in 412. He worked from afar to broker support for an oligarchic revolution in Athens, which promised to serve both Persian and his own political interests. Unable to provoke an oligarchic revolution in Athens from a distance, he offered his services to the Athenian fleet in Samos. Desperate for military leadership, the sailors elected him to be their commander, and after leading the fleet to victory in 410, he was allowed to return to Athens, where he was cleared of the old charges of impiety, though of course doubts ran deep about his loyalty. After he was unfairly blamed for a series of Athenian military setbacks, Alcibiades fled again, to Asia Minor, where he died in 404 after his enemies in Sparta and Athens arranged to have him assassinated by a Persian satrap.

By then, the Athenians had surrendered to Sparta, and the Thirty Tyrants had come to power. Led by Critias, a former ally of Alcibiades, another prominent companion of Socrates, and a longtime champion of Spartan-style political institutions, the Thirty quickly moved to abolish democracy and to kill a number of citizens the group regarded as political enemies.

According to Xenophon, Socrates tried to stay out of the fray, telling friends that it was "extraordinary that a man appointed as a political leader who was making the citizens fewer and worse than they were before was not ashamed and did not consider himself a bad political leader." The Thirty subsequently forbade Socrates from speaking in public. They nevertheless tried to implicate him in the policies of the regime, by asking his help in seizing a citizen who had been condemned to death. According to Plato, Socrates refused.

Although Socrates survived the reign of terror that followed, perhaps because of his friendship with Critias, his companions suffered mixed fortunes. Charmides, for one, joined the Thirty. But Chaerephon,

who had consulted the Delphic oracle years before, was forced into exile for his democratic sympathies. Late in 404, a civil war erupted in Athens. In the spring of 403, Critias died in a skirmish. Six months later, the democracy was restored, a political amnesty was decreed, and the stage was set for the last act in Socrates' life.

In 399 B.C., a poet named Meletus, supported by two other citizens, Lycon and Anytus (the lover whom Alcibiades had jilted while infatuated with philosophy), posted an indictment. It charged that "Socrates does injustice by not believing in the gods in whom the city believes and by introducing other new divinities. He also does injustice by corrupting the youth. The penalty demanded is death."

Despite the amnesty, feelings ran deep against citizens with Spartan sympathies. Everyone knew that Socrates had been associated with Alcibiades and Critias. And anyone who recalled the character he inspired in *The Clouds* might well conclude that he was a heretic, if not a traitor. His radically different way of life threatened a society that was still largely organized around ritual religious observances.

Two accounts of the subsequent trial survive, one by Xenophon, the other by Plato. Though professional orators often prepared texts for clients, Plato and Xenophon agree that Socrates improvised his own speech on the spot. They also agree that he was defiant and sometimes spoke in an "arrogant tone."

The charge of impiety—and such accusations were routinely brought against one's political enemies in the Athens of the day—Socrates rebutted by reference to the oracle at Delphi. He explained how his way of life grew out of his earnest effort to take the message of the god seriously: "What does the god mean? What is his riddle? I am very conscious that I am not wise at all; what then does he mean by saying that I am the wisest? For surely he does not lie; it is not legitimate for him to do so." As Socrates sees it, his quest for wisdom proves his pious regard for the commands of Apollo.

The next charge, that he had introduced new divinities, was harder to dispute. Socrates had to concede that he had commerce with a unique kind of tutelary spirit, which he called his daimon: "This began when I was a child. It is a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything." Most Greeks supposed that every human being was haunted by

a specific daimon, an immaterial and normally mute figure of one's unique fate (and happy was the man with a good daimon—hence the Greek word for happiness, *eudaimonia*). By referring in his defense to his inner voice as a daimon, Socrates tried to deflect the charge that he worshipped a new—and literally self-serving—god.

When he came to answer the charge of corrupting the young—and one cannot help but think of Alcibiades and Critias—Socrates dropped his mild manner and turned on his principal accuser, the poet Meletus. Xenophon reports a series of taunts: “Do you know anyone who is less a slave to bodily desires than I am? Do you know anyone more free? . . . Could you plausibly regard anyone as more upright? . . . Mustn't it be reasonable to describe me as wise, seeing that, ever since I began to understand speech, I have never stopped investigating and learning any good thing I could?”

The implication amounts to a counterindictment. By obeying the command of the god at Delphi and living a philosophical life utterly different from the conventional forms of life followed by Meletus or Anytus, or any of the assembled jurors—or, implicitly, any of his disgraced former companions, including Alcibiades and Critias—it is he, Socrates, who has become a paragon of perfect virtue. Those who have charged him with injustice are themselves unjust. It is they who should stand trial.

Under the Athenian democracy, the jury at a trial consisted of a large panel of citizens; in the case of Socrates, there were probably 501 in all (odd numbers were used to avoid a tie in voting). The accusers and the accused spoke in turn. When the speeches were over, jurors delivered a verdict by voting with stones.

By a slim margin, the jury found Socrates guilty.

It was Athenian custom that a defendant found guilty was asked to propose a penalty that he considered just. According to Plato, the arrogance of Socrates now reached a sublime pitch. Rejecting any penalty at all, he suggested instead that Athens should house and feed him at public expense. He wished to be duly honored for being what he defiantly still claimed to be—the best of men.

Understandably exasperated by such insolent behavior, the jury voted, this time by a larger margin, to condemn the philosopher to death.

Socrates was escorted to a jail. As the appointed day for his execution drew near, his closest surviving companions rallied round him—Phaedo, Aeschines, Antisthenes, Apollodorus, Crito, Critoboulos, Plato. Although some of them had offered to help him escape—going into exile for a period of time was a common Athenian practice, which often led to rehabilitation and a return to the city—Socrates adamantly refused to consider this customary expedient. He insisted instead on fulfilling the letter of the Athenian law by accepting the jury's death penalty, arguing (according to Plato's account) that anyone ought to obey the laws of his country, and “endure in silence whatever it instructs you to endure.”

In his last days, some say Socrates wrote poems in an effort to record some of his dreams. Plato reports that he maintained a preternatural calm, in part by conversing to the very end about the nature of the soul, his conviction that it was immortal, and his views on how best to care for it. Xenophon and Plato both express astonishment at his composure. He seemed to welcome death.

Socrates' martyrdom became the crowning event of his life in the eyes of those companions who watched Socrates drink the hemlock. His serenity in the face of death seemed to confirm the perfection of his goodness: he was a man completely at peace with himself in his final hours. And in the months and years that followed, an informal group of admirers worked hard to keep his memory alive.

Some of these professed Socrates took to wearing shabby gart and gabbing in public. They made a fetish out of cross-examining compatriots and doubting their beliefs about how best to live. As one contemporary witness sneered, some of them “aped the manners of Sparta, let their hair grow long, went hungry, refused to wash, ‘Socratized,’ and carried walking sticks.”

Other disciples—Plato above all—spurned the master's example by turning to the written word. In his Socratic dialogues, the largest extant body of such literature, Plato inaugurated two major traditions that survive to the present day.

One tradition is that of systematic theorizing, which Plato linked to the figure of Socrates and the practice of “philosophy.” Within this discipline, as it has evolved since, the claims of reason, advanced through detached analysis and logical arguments, are commonly regarded as

paramount, while a wary eye is cast on poetic invention and the workings of the unchecked imagination: images are made strictly subordinate to clearly defined ideas.

The other tradition is that of the exemplary biography—a selective, often creatively embellished recounting of an archetypal life, conveyed through images, anecdotes, and aphorisms, meant to serve as an inspiration or warning. In a letter long attributed to Plato, readers are reminded that his Socratic dialogues represent neither Plato's personal views nor the views that Socrates himself may actually have held, nor do they represent accurately the life of a real person, but rather "a Socrates idealized and made new." A venerable but often neglected genre of writing, exemplary biography conveys the ideal through the imaginary, in order to dramatize a notable character. In the case of Plato's Socrates, readers behold an idealized image of a life worth imitating—the mythic life of someone unswervingly committed to just action and right reasoning.

Plato was an unrivaled master of both impersonal theorizing and exemplary biography. But he was not alone. After the death of Socrates, a number of his other companions and disciples—Antisthenes, Phaedo, Aristippus, Aeschines, and Xenophon, among others—recounted various of the master's sayings, as well as anecdotes and episodes from the life of Socrates, elaborating a new genre, the *Sokratikoi logoi* (or "Socratic conversations"), as Aristotle called it. Although only works by Plato and Xenophon survive intact, fragments of works by other authors depict the first philosopher in a handful of stock situations: at a dinner party, giving advice to Alcibiades, demonstrating his erotic self-mastery, debating the best way to live, defending himself at his trial, and preparing to die.

The Socratic conversations mark one of the first important experiments with biography in the West. Yet while the dialogues of Plato present a beguiling picture of a living intellect in argumentative action, the genre itself, as Aristotle observed, was a species of poetry—a form of dramatic fiction, not a chronicle of attested incidents. In effect, the life of Socrates was transformed into a myth—and this became the norm for all the biographies of the philosophers of the ancient world until the rise of modern philological scholarship and the creation of documentary archives in the Renaissance and after made such mythologizing

infinitely more difficult. (Montaigne is arguably the first modern "philosopher," since he understands that the exemplary lives of antiquity invite skeptical scrutiny, if only because his own earnest efforts to imitate them suggest that these ways of life may in fact be impossible to emulate.)

In any case, the first Socratics depicted their hero inconsistently. He is a different character in the different writings of different authors. The "Socrates" of Xenophon is wise and good, but he is also something of a bully and a blowhard. The "Socrates" of Plato is more modest, and also more inquisitive, wondering almost obsessively about the reasons why one might prefer one way of life over another, one code of conduct rather than some other. Still, his approach to inquiry varies dramatically from one Platonic dialogue to another. In some of Plato's conversations, "Socrates" presses for clear definitions without defending any positive doctrine at all. In still others (including, famously, the *Republic*), he seems at some points to assert confidently various sweeping propositions about reality, human nature, and political justice (even though the dramatic context leaves it unclear whether Plato, or "Socrates," really feels any such confidence, or rather is feigning certainty in order to placate impatient interlocutors).

After undertaking a comparative study of the surviving Socratic conversations by Plato and all the others, one modern scholar felt able to enumerate only a handful of characteristics exemplified by the "Socrates" depicted by more than one Socratic author. Among the common characteristics were moral toughness and physical stamina, a love for theorizing—the ability to produce reasons for what one believes, an interest in distinguishing knowledge and opinion, and an appreciation for eros and impassioned friendship as motive forces in a shared quest for wisdom.

Unfortunately, the authors of the Socratic conversations disagree about almost everything else concerning Socrates.

The "Socrates" of Antisthenes is hostile to pleasure, while in the fragments of Aristippus, he is indulgent. The "Socrates" of Euclides thinks that there are many different names for one thing, while in the pages of Antisthenes, he asserts that there is only one *logos* for one thing. The "Socrates" of Plato routinely uses parallel cases to clarify his views, while the character in Euclides criticizes the use of analogies.

There is some irony in the fact that such wildly conflicting evidence has turned modern scholarship about the first philosopher into "a paradise of inconclusive guesswork."

Under these circumstances, to search for the "historical Socrates" in Plato would be like looking for the historical Napoleon in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. Still, if one is going to try—and it is impressive how many modern scholars have been unable to resist—there is no better place to start than Plato's *Apology*.

This is perhaps the first of Plato's Socratic conversations, and it is certainly the only one constrained by the need to dramatize an event witnessed by more than five hundred other people. And whether or not it is an accurate representation of what really happened in some sense scarcely matters: Plato's *Apology* is the most beguiling, and influential, of the Socratic myths we possess.

The Socrates of Plato's *Apology* is a *philosophos* in the purest possible sense: lacking wisdom, he is a seeker, in quest of self-knowledge. Once he has learned of Apollo's answer to Chaerephon's question, he feels compelled to assay its meaning. He is humbled by the recognition that he lacks knowledge about "the greatest things"—how to live well, how to be happy, what death holds in store. Truly ignorant, he has no specific propositions to present. Yet because he knows that he does not know, he paradoxically is—just as Apollo had proclaimed—the wisest of Athenians. And even though he has no systematic doctrines to communicate, no dogmas to teach, he *has* lived a good life, conducted by relentlessly examining himself and others. Skeptical of the convictions commonly held by his fellow citizens, he will steer clear of public affairs. Instead, within a circle of like-minded friends, he will endeavor "to care for himself" properly. And skeptical though he may be about his own understanding of the greatest things, he will consistently refuse to do anything that he has found reason to regard as unjust or wrong—even if he is tempted to avenge the unjust act of another, as custom would dictate.

His enemies suspected Socrates of speaking with *eirōneia*, or "irony" in its original, primarily pejorative sense of deliberate deceit. But the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* is emphatically no ironist: "Throughout my life, in any public activity I may have engaged in, I am the same man as I am in private life." He is the opposite of a chameleon like Alcibiades:

he refuses to flatter the jury, he will not don masks or lie about his beliefs. "From me you will hear the whole truth, though not, by Zeus, gentlemen, expressed in embroidered and stylized phrases." If he has "neglected what occupies most people: wealth, household affairs, the position of general or public orator or other offices," that is because "I thought myself too honest to survive." He consistently says only what he thinks to be true, and does only what he believes to be right—demonstrating his convictions "not in words but in action."

Here, as in other texts by other Socratic writers, we are encouraged to appraise the character of Socrates by judging his integrity—and this requires judging how his life harmonizes, or fails to harmonize, with his declared convictions. Like its classical cognate, the English word *integrity* has a range of connotations, from wholeness and completeness to soundness and freedom from defect. In certain contexts, the word has a physical bearing, as when an engineer speaks of a sound physical structure as having integrity; in still other contexts, the word in English more simply evokes moral goodness.

The Socrates of Plato's *Apology* has integrity in all these senses. He is physically sound and morally unblemished, and he is consistently able to harmonize his actions with the beliefs he provisionally holds after rationally examining them. On trial, he represents himself not just as a model of moral perfection but also as a paragon of rational unity.

This aspect of Socrates' character is important, for it helps to distinguish Socrates from other models of moral perfection. In his landmark study *The Great Philosophers*, Karl Jaspers began with four "paradigmatic individuals": Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus. The lives of all four exemplified moral teachings that could later be codified and expressed in rational systems of belief, in this way offering a spur to different traditions of philosophical reflection. But only Socrates taught that "there is no greater evil one can suffer than to hate reasonable discourse." And only Socrates demanded of his followers that they jettison traditional certainties and strive toward a rational unity of word and deed.

To achieve such a goal implicitly requires that one gain an accurate understanding of oneself; that one self-consciously uphold a set of beliefs about the best way to live that is consistent and reasonable, and also that one's conduct comport with these beliefs. Meeting all

these requirements is especially tough for anyone committed, as Socrates is in the *Apology*, to a way of life based on a continuing examination of one's core beliefs.

After all, to be prepared constantly to question what one thinks, one must be ready to speak frankly about one's beliefs, and be ready, under examination, to revise them. Because the beliefs at issue concern the conduct of one's life, one must, if one revises one's core beliefs, be willing as well to change how one lives. To be able, in addition, to resist doing anything that one believes (however provisionally) wrong or unjust requires a degree of self-control—an unwavering attention to one's habits of thought and patterns of behavior—that is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain consistently. If he would organize and integrate his impulses and impressions, habits and beliefs into a consistent form of life, the philosopher must improve his ability to reason consistently and to act resolutely, in part by purging his soul of unwelcome bodily passions and appetites that he judges unhealthy.

Yet despite his professed ignorance, and despite his inconclusive efforts to become wise, the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* nevertheless personifies the most sublime sort of conviction: he is prepared to die rather than renounce his beliefs. Serene in his willingness to sacrifice himself, he will give up living in order to prove his unswerving commitment to his transcendental project, his unending search for wisdom.

From the sheer number of Socratic conversations that were published posthumously, we can be sure that Socrates was an impressive, even awe-inspiring moral figure. But we will never know whether Socrates, as he actually existed, was as consistently good as the character depicted in the *Apology*. The ascetic hero of Plato's dialogue has nevertheless, subsequently chastened countless readers, inspiring them to try harder, to aim higher—and, by choosing to emulate Socrates, to take pains to embody philosophy as the best conceivable form of life, even if that entails a willingness to die for one's convictions.

Can one live in accordance with this idealized character? Or is the image of the first philosopher in Plato's *Apology* too good to be true?

This is not a merely theoretical question; one will never know unless one tries. And we are enjoined to *try* (as Alcibiades did not)—even if our efforts fail, and even if, by really trying, we prove only that the

rational unity that the Socrates of Plato's *Apology* embodies is, in practice, not feasible for us.

Such, in effect, is the peculiar challenge posed by Plato's image of the first philosopher—a vaulting and possibly self-defeating ambition ratified, more than two millennia later, by Friedrich Nietzsche: "I know of no better aim of life than that of perishing *animae magnae prodigius*, in pursuit of the great and the impossible."